

Albatross Cottages
3353, 3367, 3407, and 3415
Albatross Street
San Diego
San Diego County
California

HABS No. CA-2165

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ALBATROSS COTTAGES

HABS No. CA-2165

Location: 3353, 3367, 3407, and 3415 Albatross Street, San Diego,
San Diego County, California.

Significance: These four cottages on Albatross Street provide excellent examples of the work of architect Irving John Gill. It appears that instead of being a project which developed over a long period, as was previously thought, all the houses were planned about the same time (circa 1912) as part of a comprehensive scheme. Some of the houses were not built for several years afterwards, and some were never completed, but what was accomplished follows closely the plans established about 1912. The houses are notable for their careful planning and detailing, their integration into a steep canyon site, and the use of landscaping to insure privacy.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The property on which these houses stand was purchased between 1906 and 1908 by the Misses Lee and Teats. Surprisingly little is known of these two women. Alice Lee, from a distinguished family, moved to San Diego in 1902 for her health. She became extremely active in local activities and served on the board of countless civic organizations. She lived in a house designed by Irving John Gill on Seventh Avenue (HABS No. CA-2161). Directly across a shared garden from her house was the house of Katherine A. Teats (HABS No. CA-2162). The two ladies planned for a group of rental houses to be constructed on land which was then north of San Diego. Several variants of the scheme exist in the collection of Gill drawings at the art galleries of the University of California, Santa Barbara and have been reproduced as illustrations accompanying this report. Each of the schemes envisions a number of houses on Front Street and Albatross Street, with the canyon between them landscaped into terraces, pools, walks and a large boulevard at the bottom. The reason for this latter feature is unclear, but the landscaping obviously was planned to link the houses through shared open space the way Gill had done for the Teats and Lee houses on Seventh Avenue. The Albatross Cottages are among the most satisfying Gill designed and they are largely unchanged. In them Gill attempted to provide many of the features he had used in larger houses, but on a smaller scale, and in a more economical fashion. The key themes were simplicity of construction, ease of maintenance and sanitation.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The houses are all constructed of frame construction with the studs sheathed and plastered inside and out. Gill used his thin wall interior partitions in places, employing 1 x 4's set sidewise, to increase usable space. He was also very interested in soundproofing, specifying for example, deafening quilt for the bathroom walls at 3407 Albatross.

Gill went very far in his elimination of moldings and applied ornamentation for ease in cleaning, and for sanitary reasons. The houses are by no means unornamented, however. The Teats house at 3415 has a great deal of exterior wood ornamentation and Gill called for mission tiles, stained glass, and ornamental iron for all the houses. His flush wall surfaces, elimination of picture moldings and floor coves were designed to avoid any lodging for dust and to prevent the penetration of water into the walls, but was fond of certain types of historical details. The hardware of these houses is extremely simple but frequently ingenious. The doorknobs, like the rest of the hardware, are of brass and have plain round pulls. The many drawers and cabinet doors all have simple hinges and latches. Gill designed a balcony of wrought iron which he used in all four buildings. The same type of arched door with movable sash and screen, all joined to form a flush door, appears in all the houses.

On the exterior, these cottages are fairly plain, cubic shaped structures with relatively little to break up the flat planes of the walls. Originally there were more open porches and terraces, and at 3367 Albatross, there was a pergola on the second floor terrace. Many of these have been filled in, making the intimate connection between outdoors and indoors less obvious. Although these houses are of frame construction, they appear to be influenced by Gill's more typical concrete construction. They are as "modern" as anything Gill did, in their cubic simplicity, and collectively constitute one of the best examples of his mature style. They also clearly illustrate Gill's idea that the plainness of the walls would act as a foil for the luxurious vegetation of the area. All of the houses have attached garages and feature such as cool closets and cabinets which can be opened from the inside or outside among their thoughtful and advanced labor-saving devices.

In his article on the "Home of the Future" in the May 1916 issue of Craftsman Magazine (from which excerpts are given in the appendix to this report), Gill describes many of his reasons for constructing the Albatross houses the way he did.

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APPENDIX

From an important Gill article, "The Home of the Future: The New Architecture of the West: Small Homes for a Great Country" Craftsman Magazine, May 1916.

We should build our house simple, plain and substantial as a boulder, then leave the ornamentation of it to Nature, who will tone it with lichens. chisel it with storms, make it gracious and friendly with vines and flower shadows as she does the stone in the meadow. I believe also that houses should be built more substantially and should be made absolutely sanitary. If the cost of unimportant ornamentation were put into construction then we would have a more lasting and more dignified architecture. In California we have long been experimenting with the idea of producing a perfectly sanitary, labor-saving house, one where the maximum of comfort may be had with of drudgery. In the recent houses I have built the walls are finished flush with the casings and the line where the wall joins the flooring is slightly rounded, so that it forms one continuous piece with no place for the dust to enter or to lodge, or crack for vermin of any kind to exist. There is no molding for pictures, plates or chairs, no baseboards, paneling or wainscoting to catch and hold the dust. The doors are single slabs of hand-polished mahogany swung on invisible hinges or else made so that they slide in the wall. In some of the houses all windows and door frames are of steel. They never wear out, warp or burn, a point of importance in fireproof construction. The drain boards are sunk in magnesite which is made in one piece with the walls and all cornices rounded, so not a particle of grease or dirt can lodge, or dampness collect and become unwholesome. The bathtubs are boxed and covered with magnesite up to the porcelain.

By this manner of building there is no chance anywhere in the house for dust to accumulate. This minimizes the labor of keeping the house clean and gives the rooms a sweet, pure, simple and dignified appearance.

There is something very restful and satisfying to my mind in the simple cube house with creamy walls, sheer and plain, rising boldly into the sky, unrelieved by cornices or overhang of roof, unornamented save for the vines that soften a line or creepers that wreath a pillar or flowers that inlay color more sentimentally than any tile could do. I like the bare honesty of these houses, the childlike frankness and chaste simplicity of them.